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ABSTRACT

The two studies described in this article investigated the effectiveness of educational-based programs as crisis intervention strategies for limiting the negative effects of divorce on preschool-age children. In the first study, a pretest posttest control group design was used. Two experimental groups, including seven children from divorced homes and eight children from intact families, were given an 18-week preschool program experience. A further eight children from intact homes served as controls for maturation effects. Children ranged from 3.5 to 5 years of age. Measures of children's intelligence and locus of control, mothers' perceptions of their child's social adjustment, similar teachers' ratings, and parents' self reports were used to gather data. The second study was conducted to investigate the effects of a preschool education program on the development of important social competency skills. It was hypothesized that a highly structured, adult-directed preschool program, which uses discussions, role playing, and social modeling would, in contrast to control group comparisons, positively accelerate listening skills and perspective taking competencies for children from both intact and divorced families. It is concluded overall for the two studies that some but not all behaviors might be assisted by placing young children of recently divorced parents in preschool programs. (Author/RH)

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THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE:
OUTCOME OF A PRESCHOOL INTERVENTION PROGRAM

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Bloom, Asher and White (1978) have summarized National Center for Health Statistics and U.S. Bureau of the Census data on divorce. For example, in 1976 alone more than two million new marriages were reported with a corresponding one million marriages ending in divorce. For that year alone, more than one million children from these families experienced the impact of family dissolution. Given divorce rates continue to gradually accelerate (for at least the past decade) this means more than 10 million children experience divorce each decade. I rather doubt, from anyone's perspective, that this number would be viewed as an inconsequential figure.

A number of excellent reviews are available on the social psychology of the divorce process (e.g., Bloom, Asher & White, 1978; Smart, 1977; Waller, 1958; Weiss, 1975; Krantzler, 1973; Wiseman, 1975 to name just a few). Early stages of the divorce process include for the parents a sense of alienation, distress and loneliness, shock, and denial and depression. Later stages dealing with recovery require interpersonal reorganization, life style changes, and a resynthesis of identities. While many interventionists in their description of the divorce process have failed to recognize that similar social processes emerge for children who are likewise experiencing family dissolution, there is ample evidence to suggest children have parallel adjustment problems. We shall return to this issue later.

Postdivorce adjustment for parents given the custodial role of caring for the children have been observed to be particularly difficult. Typically, but not exclusively, this custodial role is awarded to mothers in this country (Meyers, 1976). Further, recent evidence indicates that temporary undesirable behavior in children resulting from anxiety about parental separation can precipitate ineffective parenting, leading to maternal anxiety, depression, and self-perceived incompetence (e.g., Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976; 1977). Postdivorce adjustment can thus be influenced by turbulence associated with (a) hostility related to the single parenting role, (b) hostile conflict between former spouses perpetuated by the children, or (c) continued contact between divorced parents due to visitation rights (Cline & Westman, 1971). Further, other evidence suggests that divorce can have certain short- or long-range negative consequences for children. This is not to say that several studies have been completed which suggest positive consequences many not also emerge (e.g., see Martoz-Baden, Adams, Hueche, Munro & Munro, 1979; Crossman, Shea, & Adams, 1980).

The available research on the consequences of divorce clearly suggest there are potential negative consequences of divorce for parents and children. Bloom, Asher and White (1978) summarize data which indicate the consequences for adults are both broad and un-

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desirable. This review of research indicates that correlates of marital disruption include (a) higher rates of psychopathology, (b) greater probabilities of automobile accidents and fatalities, (c) more frequent illness, and (d) a greater chance of suicide or homicide--as a few examples from many. But what of children from these same divorced families--do they experience equally undesirable and detrimental consequences? Two longitudinal studies directed at the study of consequences of divorce upon children's family interactions and cognitive and social development perhaps exemplify the negative consequences which can emerge for children following divorce. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1975, 1978) have shown that following divorce, children are likely to experience disorganization in their daily lives. Household roles, routine tasks, and schedules are likely to become disorganized and irregular. Further, the quality of parent-child interactions appear to change. Divorced parents, in comparison to those of intact families, are likely to make fewer maturity demands, to communicate less effectively, and to make fewer consistent demands upon the child. Indeed, divorced mothers may become more restrictive and to give more demands that are actually resisted or ignored by the child following divorce. Other evidence reported by both Hetherington et al. and Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) suggest that at least for the first 12 to 18 months following divorce that children are likely to become more oppositional, aggressive, distractible, and demanding. Other reviews of the research literature suggest that children who have experienced a divorce may also experience reduced or impaired cognitive development (e.g., Biller, 1974; Shinn, 1978).

With such data in mind, it is rather startling that so little has actually been done to study or develop intervention programs which might have mitigating effects upon the divorce process for children. In that previous research has shown that children may experience detrimental effects on their cognitive and social development due to divorce, as part of a larger USDA funded grant to study Social Competency in Children, we have undertaken the study of preschool based intervention as one potential program which may ameliorate detrimental consequences of divorce for preschool age children. In this presentation we shall summarize, in brief, two intervention efforts which were constructed around social competency themes. The first reported study has been published (Crossman & Adams, 1980). Therefore, we shall provide only the fundamental outcome of this study and refer the reader to the published report. The second study remains unpublished. Hence, we shall provide more detail on the study and its results and conclusion.

STUDY I:

It is readily recognized that divorce is a stressful life event. Further, it is intuitively evident that such an event reduces children's contact with their parents. However, little systematic attention has been given to the investigation of support systems which might be used to negate long-range negative consequences of divorce on children. Crisis theory would suggest that a temporary intervention with the family, or child, under stress could minimize or negate negative consequences. Further, Zajonc's work on social facilitation would suggest that an intervention support system that offered adult-child interactions (which are in addition to parent-child interactions within the divorced family) might well mediate the negative consequences

of parental unavailability. In that preschool programs are common throughout this country and it is generally believed that such programs enhance cognitive and social development, we have completed an investigation to determine if a preschool experience, immediately following divorce, could function as a crisis intervention in negating the detrimental consequences of divorce on children's social and cognitive development.

Sample. Twenty-three children were randomly selected within their appropriate family structure (divorced and intact-homes) from the waiting list of over 200 families for the USU Child Development Lab program. Two experimental groups, including seven children from divorced homes and eight children from intact families were given an 18-week preschool program experience. Eight children from intact homes, not admitted to the preschool until after the study, served as a control for maturation effects. These children ranged from 3½ to 5 years in age.

Procedure. A standard pretest-posttest control group design was utilized in this study. A traditional preschool program for the two experimental groups was given for four days of the week. Structured classroom activities based upon cognitive enrichment were held for approximately one hour each day. The control group had not had, nor were they involved in, preschool activities. (It would have been desirable to have had a divorce-child control group, but we found due to the necessity for employment no such sample could be obtained in our research vicinity.)

Measurements. All children were assessed on the information, similarities and vocabulary subscales of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence and were interviewed on the Stephens and Delys Locus of Control Measure for Preschool Children. Mothers' perceptions of the child's social adjustment were obtained on the Behar and Stringfield behavioral rating scales--this test measures three basic factors: (a) hostility-aggressiveness, (b) anxious-fearfulness, and (c) hyperactivity-distractibility. Preschool teachers provided similar ratings after two weeks of the preschool experience and again at the close of the study. Parents also responded to 31 items developed by Schaefer and Finkelstein to measure parental perceptions of the child's (a) attempts to control the mother, (b) resisting affection, (c) independence versus dependence, (d) considerateness, and (e) helpfulness. Finally, using the 91 item Q-sort task from the Childrearing Practices Report parents responded to their self-reported behavior and relationship with their child.

Basic results. In brief overview the results from this study included:

- A. No evidence that mothers from divorced or intact-family homes experienced differential perceived behaviors on the Schaefer and Finkelstein measure. Hence, maternal perceptions of the child's behavior toward the parent appeared to be unrelated to family structure.
- B. On the Preschool Behavioral Rating Form no significant difference in maternal reports of children's aggressiveness, fearfulness, or distractibility was observed between the family structure groups. However, a nonsignificant trend indicated the divorced mothers tended to view their children as somewhat more anxious and fearful.

C. Five basic conclusions emerged from the Childrearing Practices Report data. These findings included:

1. Divorced parents were most inclined to report themselves as respecting and encouraging the child's individual opinion, to utilize reasoning in disciplinary attempts, and to threaten but not use physical punishment.
2. Divorced mothers were most likely to feel anger toward their children.
3. Divorced mothers reported themselves to be most likely to take the child's preference into account when making family plans.
4. Divorced mothers were least likely to tolerate socially-devalued, acting-out, or performing behavior. However, they were more tolerant of occasional fantasy behavior such as daydreaming.
5. Control group mothers were most likely to report enjoyment in having a house full of children. However, divorced mothers reported spending longer periods of time with their children in what was judged to be educationally fulfilling experiences.

D. The major findings on the potential ameliorative effects of preschool on negative consequences for divorce included:

1. While children from divorced homes displayed lower IQ functioning at the pretest, posttest comparisons revealed no significant differences. No systematic effect on locus of control was observed due to preschool effects.
2. Hyperactivity-distractibility was found to decrease due to preschool experience for divorced children. However, the program appeared to have little effect on mitigating the sense of fear and anxiety for children of divorce.

Conclusion from Study I These data suggest that decreased maternal effectiveness in childrearing due to divorce remains in question. The present data suggest that divorced mothers may actually view themselves as remarkably involved and reasonably effective in their childrearing behavior. Divorced mothers were very similar in their self-reported behavior to those in intact-families. Although *in vivo* observations may potentially lead to different conclusions. While the data from the preschool intervention study suggests such programs may be effective in establishing the conditions appropriate for allowing the child to recover from the negative consequences of divorce on cognitive development, these data suggest it may be somewhat more difficult to accomplish the same outcome on all social development behaviors--in particular, fearfulness or anxiety.

STUDY II:

While the first investigation has shown promise for the potential use of preschool intervention programs with children of divorce, and other investigations have shown the potential for positive effects of varying learning experiences upon young children's acquisition of social behavior (e.g., Miller & Dyer, 1975), much is yet to be learned about the construction of programs which will enhance social development. Indeed, over the course of the first study and related experience we have come to appreciate that most divorced parents are particularly interested in their child's social adjustment, interpersonal skills, and behavior. While cognitive and learning skills are of interest, parents concerns about social skills seem to overshadow their interest in cognitive development for the preschool age child. Therefore, the second investigation in our series of studies was undertaken to study the effects of a preschool education program on the development of important social competency skills.

Previous research has suggested that discussion of interpersonal situations (Silvern, et al., 1979), use of visual and verbal information (Cox, 1977), role-taking opportunities (Chandler, 1973), and social modeling experiences (Cosgrove & Patterson, 1977, 1978) can enhance the development of perspective taking and listening skills. Further evidence would suggest that a highly structured, adult-directed preschool may be facilitative of listening skills and social competency development. Stein, Cofer and Susman (1977) have reported that children in highly structured preschool programs may be less inclined to engage in prosocial behavior, but these same children do remain more attentive to adult-directed activities. Therefore, high attentiveness to adult-directed activities may result in increased salience of the adult role model, and facilitate the internalization of social competencies which are coached or modeled by the teacher. Using the findings from adult-directed preschool programs as our foundation, my colleague Joseph DeMarsh and I (1981) hypothesized that a highly structured, adult-directed preschool program, which uses discussions, role-playing, and social modeling would, in contrast to control group comparisons, positively accelerate listening skills and perspective taking competencies for children from both intact-families and divorced homes.

Sample. A total of 36 male (n = 18) and female (n = 18) children were drawn from the enrollment list, with 18 children placed into a university preschool program and 18 children used as research controls. The age range was identical to that in Study I.

Measurements. Given recent arguments that perspective taking consists of multiple dimensions (e.g., Rubin, 1978) two measures of perspective taking were used. Affective perspective taking, or recognition of appropriate feelings for specific situation contents, was assessed through the Borke Empathy Scale (Borke, 1971, 1975). Using four faces representing the emotions of happy, sad, afraid and angry, children were told stories in which another child might easily be perceived as experiencing one of the four emotions (e.g., eating a favorite food, losing a toy, being forced to go to bed at night). Each story is accompanied by a picture of a child with a blank face engaging in the described activity and the child is asked to pick the face most

appropriate for the perceived feeling of the child in the picture. The Borke Empathy Scale has been widely used with preschool children, and due to minimal requirements associated with verbal skills, offers a reasonable measure of nonverbal recognition of feelings.

Perceptual perspective taking, or the ability to describe another person's perceptual field, was measured by the Piaget and Inhelder (1956) role-taking measure. Frequently it is referred to as the "three mountains test." This device was designed to measure the ability of a child to distinguish another's viewpoint from his or her own. In this measure, the child is shown a scale model of three mountains and tested for the ability to represent the appearance of the mountains from three positions other than his or her own (e.g., the child sits facing the mountains and is asked to select from a series of photographs the one that depicts what the mountain looks like to a doll sitting on the opposite side of the mountain).

Listening skills were assessed using the PrePrimary Auditory Screening Test (Dickson, Harriss, Marcus & Rupert, 1972) which assesses (a) auditory discrimination, (b) auditory figure-ground, (c) auditory memory, and (d) auditory sequencing. Each process is systematically assessed on four subtests with a total summed score. The PPAST is a six-minute test which requires the child to point to visual representation of the auditory stimuli, thus eliminating the auditory-verbal process transition and boosting reliability with preschool age children. Auditory discrimination measures the ability to hear specific words. Auditory figure-ground assesses the ability to discern verbal messages from background noises. Auditory memory assesses recall, and auditory sequencing assesses the ability to follow a chain of verbal messages.

Procedure. Using random procedures children were placed into either (a) a preschool classroom representing the pretest posttest experimental group (n = 18) or (b) a pretest posttest control group (n = 14). Four children were dropped from the pretest posttest control group due to unavailability at posttest time.

The preschool experience served as the experimental treatment. The program consisted of a 2½ hour experience with children attending during the first four days for each of 18 consecutive weeks. The preschool program was directed by a head teacher (Masters level instructor) with four student teachers. The program was a highly structured, adult-directed experience, with student teachers providing 1½ hours of curriculum activities and the remaining time free for unstructured play activities. During each class period, teachers provided approximately ½ hour of story time activities, where children were provided visual materials to examine, were read verbal information, had interpersonal situations introduced, and experienced discussions in a group setting. Children were instructed each day to listen, with teachers encouraging children to think about two or more perspectives in each story experience. The remaining structured time utilized the learning centers (with teachers providing modeled behavior which were thought to enhance perspective taking) or field trip experiences.

Instructions are given frequently in such an adult-directed program, with children encouraged to listen and maintain attentiveness to the

directions. Learning center and field visits focused upon weekly themes of high appeal to preschool age children. For example, academic experiences were associated with themes dealing with life roles (e.g., helpers, leaders, followers) or classification concepts which are used in everyday life (e.g., animals, flowers, vehicles, objects). Cognitive (perceptual and affective) perspective taking was encouraged during the examination of weekly themes, with teachers encouraging role-playing activities at the various learning centers and during free play. The curriculum program paralleled that of the official Head Start program sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity outlined in the Rainbow Books (1965) available from that agency.

All pretest measures were obtained during the first week of the preschool program, while posttest measures were obtained during the last week. Control group children were assessed in their own homes, while preschool children were assessed in familiar school surroundings. It is possible that the location of testing may confound the results of this investigation. However, it was decided that familiarity was more important than absolutely equivalent testing conditions in assuring trust and cooperation between the tester and child.

²
Results. To assess intraindividual change, children in the preschool program and the appropriate control group sample were compared on pretest and posttest scores. Standard t-test paired comparisons were completed on each dependent measure. A comparison of pretest and posttest scores for the preschool experimental group indicated affective perspective taking, $t(17) = 3.53$, $p < .003$, and listening skills, $t(17) = 2.20$, $p < .04$, increased between the pretest and posttest measures. However, no significant perceptual perspective taking changes were observed. In comparison, for the pretest posttest control group, only affective perspective taking showed a significant developmental trend, $t(13) = 2.72$, $p < .02$. While both perceptual perspective taking and listening skills increased between pretest and posttest, the trends were not statistically significant.

Three separate analyses of covariance were completed on the posttest dependent measures using a Sex x Treatment factorial with pretest scores and age as covariates. Both covariates approached but were not found to be significant. Significant treatment effects were observed on listening skill development, $F(2, 26) = 4.23$, $p < .05$. Children in the preschool program made more substantial gains in listening skills than control group comparisons. No treatment effects were observed on the perspective taking measures.

Given the total listening skill score consisted of four subscales, additional analyses were completed (using the same covariance model) to identify whether or not all scales were equally influenced by preschool education influences. Three of the four scales reflected consistent differences. Significant differences were observed on auditory memory, sequencing and figure-ground.

Conclusion from Study II. Regardless of family structure or type, the highly structured, adult-directed preschool program, which utilized role-playing, visual and verbal instructions, and social modeling technique was found to enhance listening but not perspective taking skills. Hence, the development of a preschool intervention program to enhance social skill formation may be associated with very specific social competency behaviors--where no one program can assure positive outcomes on all social competence behavioral profiles.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

Collectively these two studies were conducted as part of a larger project to study the development of social competencies in young children. Given previous research has shown children experience at least some temporary negative consequences due to divorce, it was judged appropriate to determine if educational based programs could be used as a crisis intervention with preschool age children. It appears from these data that some, but not all behaviors might be assisted through the placement of young children into preschool programs. It is believed, however, that future research can provide evidence for new and creative programs directed at broadening preschool program effects on divorced children's behavior and development.

Footnotes

¹The first investigation was completed with Sharyn Crossman who is currently a doctoral student in the College of Home Economics at Florida State University. The second study was completed with Joseph DeMarsh who is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary.

²No significant differences were observed due to coming from a divorced or an intact-family background. Therefore, remaining analyses collapsed across this variable.

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